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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the concept of modernity found in Black literature, and considers how Black literature can be utilized in literature, particularly American literature, courses. (DB)

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THE THEMES OF BLACK LITERATURE: A RESPONSE AND CONTINUATION

by Arthur J. Sabatini

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In the May issue of the *Bulletin,* David B. Buzzard offers some suggestions for the teaching of Black Literature in the high school. Although the article was obviously motivated by sincere intentions, it stands, nevertheless, marred by several misconceptions that still persist with regard to this already misunderstood issue. The purpose of this essay is to indicate some of Mr. Buzzard's short-comings and to offer some alternatives and suggestions concerning the teaching of Black literature.

The most noticeable shortcoming in Mr. Buzzard's essay is his pejorative language and patronizing attitude toward "what should be read." Such statements as "black writing. . .has indeed taken its place alongside the white works;" and, "Let's face it, black writers often make the language and actions of unsophisticated, ordinary people come alive, and they frequently come alive in explosive, explicit four-letter words and scenes" exhibit the type of generalizing and implicit reduction that systematically has plagued the Black experience and its art. The value judgements connoted in these statements are hardly arguable on either an intellectual or literary level. What criteria, one might ask, places "white works," or any works of art, on a level to be strived for? How are such aesthetic judgments made? One might also indicate that, say, Lennie and George (*Of Mice and Men*) or almost any of Faulkner's characters are neither sophisticated nor extraordinary in anything but their presentation. Finally, though "four-letter words and scenes" are another matter, a cursory glance at the history of American literature will reveal that present usage of "obscenities" was uncommon. The point to be made here is that our evaluations of a body of literature should not be based on solely contemporary trends or examples.

Mr. Buzzard's article continues to cite a number of works that he finds suitable for the classroom. Again, some of his rationalizations and opinions concerning the selections are suspect. For example, he notes that certain plays are useful "If the teacher is trying to break the snore syndrome;" and, that *Native Son* "should provide enough action and excitement to satisfy even the most recalcitrant mechanic-to-be;" and, that Gordon Park's *The Learning Tree* "includes enough seaminess to keep students awake." These reasons make one wonder about the teacher whose interests lie more in daydream breaking than education. (I might add that I have been selective in extracting these quotes; however, their presence, I feel, severely detracts from the better points made in the essay.) I would like to note that the teacher who is interested in sensationalism, seediness or pure excitement would do better to leave works by Black authors on the shelf as use of the material in this manner would seriously detract from the purposes and themes of Black writers. The more viable approach would be to examine the reasons and intentions behind the uses of these devices in several works. Let the appeal focus on the causes of these elements rather than the results.

The remainder of the article presents several "judicious" works for use in the classroom. Although the books cited certainly should be examined, the notion of being "judicious" is questionable. Literature by Black American authors is modern literature. It is a literature of protest and indictment. Caution represents, to my mind, a willingness to acknowledge but not pursue the elements of the Black experience as rendered in art. Furthermore, the presentation of the "safe" works seems to suggest an obscuring of the basic issues and an outright fear of confronting the ideas and attitudes of Black Americans. In order to explore Black literature, the myths and odious connotations of it must be faced and evaluated—not with preconceived notions about aesthetic standards or naive rebukings of harshness, but

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with a forthright awareness of the modern condition and its complexities and horrors. Literature is the symbolic transformation of human feeling, as Susanne Langer contends, and the study of only "safe" works helps to perpetrate those feelings we want to see, not those that exist. The following lines, from a poem, "Black Art," by Leroi Jones, express an attitude that has to be recognized when attempting to study modern, and especially Black, literature.

Poems are bullshit unless they are

. . .

live flesh &

cursing blood. . . .

In the above paragraph, I noted that Black literature is essentially modern literature. The themes of the modern tradition are apparent in almost all Black writing and this factor, often unacknowledged, places this body of work in a unique position when considering approaches to this subject. For the remainder of this essay, then, I will address myself to this concept of modernity and an aspect of the study of Black literature hinted at, but not pursued, by Mr. Buzzard; namely, how can Black literature be utilized in literature, particularly American literature, courses?

The predominant theme in modern literature is the quest for identity in a world devoid of meaning and purpose. From the beginnings of the nineteenth century to the present day, man has been faced with the torment of defining his individuality in a cosmos where God and nature are indifferent, where the forces of technology, scientism and oppression have dehumanized him and driven him to escapism, despair and madness. He has found himself alienated, frustrated, incapable of action and confronted with the task of affirming his existence. American literature, and all modern literature for that matter, records this experience in its manifold presences. Indeed, the entire history of American literature has been concerned with the quest for an identity that can be called American. Thus, Melville sends his heros to sea in search of meaning and themselves; Hawthorne repeatedly deals with characters who are alienated from society because of their convictions and actions; Poe utilizes the imagination and the bizarre to intensify his visions of frustration and loss of self in an uncompromising universe; and, Crane characterizes economic and sociological oppression and its consequences. (Each of these writers, too, can be duly noted for his sensationalism, seaminess and sexuality.)

One does not have to search far to discover these themes and ideas in early or contemporary Black writers. The autobiographies and slave narratives echo the presences of oppression, dehumanization and the quest to even physically affirm oneself. The notions of escapism and despair are heard time and again in such early poets as George Moses Horton and Frances Harper. Some of these accounts are more than bizzare as they are reports of the reality of the life of the slave. One could cite numerous works and their relationship to the American experience. Their use in courses should be apparent. The works all stand as substantial accounts of the development of the American sensibility. To use Mr. Buzzard's phrase, let's face it, this is our heritage, historical, literary and intellectual.

The twentieth century, of course, continues this tradition. It would be futile to list the writers and thinkers who consistently deal with the pathos, complexity, humor and contradictions of the modern mind. It would also be futile to argue the quality of the works written. (Mr. Buzzard admirably points to the literary achievements of the works he lists.) The history of Black literature includes innumerable works that portray the American experience from that particular point of view of a native son. If it is the development of the American literary and intellectual history that we are interested

in, all aspects of it must be confronted, especially the blackness.

In the introduction to Richard Wright's *Native Son,* Wright speaks of the bleakness of the American past and its chroniclers. His concluding remarks should be noted in considering that heritage and its products.

> But we do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough
> to appease the spiritual hunger of even a James; and we have in
> the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life
> dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent
> horror; horror would invent him.

The title of Mr. Buzzard's article is "Black Literature: It Won't Bite." I would like to conclude these remarks by noting that it does bite and that unless we are willing to be bitten, the misconceptions and darkness will persist.

Editor's Note: Arthur Sabatini, a graduate student in English at Ohio University, has taught courses in Black Literature as well as other English courses. He plans to continue teaching after completing his graduate work.

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